The Selmer Maccaferri Guitar and Gypsy Jazz

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What makes the guitars of today so particularly appealing is their great variety – how different one looks from another, their construction, materials, shape, color, type of strings, acoustic or electric, bridge, nut, even the tuning pegs – and above all, the *sound*. No other instrument has undergone and continues to undergo so many permutations. But it was not always that way.

When the Selmer Maccaferri guitar was introduced it heralded a revolutionary approach to guitar building, tone creation, techniques, and it became directly associated with a new genre of music. This came about by the convergence of a number of exceptional personalities and at a time of great change and upheaval in the world at large. It is the story of modernization in a microcosm – of when a slower, more staid way of life came into contact with an urbanizing, industrializing world, and all that that entails. In this paper it is my hope to be able to tie all these disparate elements together to tell this fascinating story.

1. The State of the Guitar at the Beginning of the 20th Century

At the beginning of the 1900s the classical guitar design introduced by Spanish luthier Antonio de Torres had been the worldwide standard for guitar making for over a half a century. These guitars, first constructed by Torres in the mid-1800s, differ little from the classical guitars we know today – a wide, flat neck joining the body at the 12th fret, with strings of gut (now nylon) and silk and steel. Torres' main innovations were of increasing the size of the guitar's body, emphasis of the soundboard as the main creator of sound and tone, and the improved tuning achieved by replacing friction pegs with mechanical tuners.

In terms of musical instrument production, the beginning of the 1900s was no different than the decades and centuries before. Regional workshops were situated more or less in one central location in each European country and responded to the demands of the local citizenry. Hence, in Spain, the main instrument produced was the classical guitar, Italian luthiers crafted both classical and steel string guitars along with mandolins and other stringed instruments, and Germany and France were well-known for producing a large variety of both string and wind instruments.

In France, instrument making had been centered in the town of Mirecourt in the Vosges mountains since the 1630s. By the dawn of the 20th century, the town was producing more than 80,000 instruments annually. Also mass industrialization and more work in the cities spawned a wave of migrations of people across Europe. Thus, at the beginning of the new century and in the decades to follow many Italian luthiers ended up in France, becoming the predominant makers of stringed instruments there.

2. The Bal-Musette

The term "musette" was originally the name of a type of bagpipe that was used by the rural people of the Auvergne region in France. As the turn of the 20th century

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andindustrial revolution inspired migrations into the cities, Paris began to fill with factory workers from the provinces, including the Auvergne. Once there, on their nights and weekends the workers would meet up in establishments to meet, drink, and dance the workdays away. Of course, music from home helped to conquer the feelings of displacement, and these places became known as "Bals-Musettes."

As the music developed and new immigrants from Italy arrived in Paris, the instrumentation began to change. The bagpipe, with its limited range and characteristic sound, was soon supplanted by an Italian instrument – the accordion. Its popularity was cemented with the fame of accordionist Emile "Mimile" Vacher, who is often credited as the originator of this genre. Vacher was noted for playing waltzes as well as incorporating virtually every dance rhythm of the time. For harmonic and rhythmic accompaniment, Vacher imported a second musical migrant.

Already in the 19th century the banjo had begun appearing in Europe via American minstrel groups, but was popularized by touring American and British jazz bands after the introduction of this music in the early 1900s. For the music of the bal-musettes, this instrument became the ideal accompanist to the accordion. Soon, there were a number of banjomen playing various types of banjos in the bal-musette dancehalls. The most prevalent types were the banjo-mandolin, 4-string tenor & 6-string banjo guitar. And, by far the most accomplished banjo players at this time were a people known as the Manouche, sometimes called Gitans, or as we know them generally, Gypsies.

3. The Gypsies

The term, "Gypsy," derives from a misconception. The word was a shortening, perhaps perjorative, of a wandering homogenic group of peoples thought to have emigrated from Egypt. Today, we know that they were actually Hindus from India and as long as 1,500 years ago began their slow migration westwards across Asia and into Europe. They are a loose federation, consisting of many subgroups and go by or are known as names such as the Manouche or Gitans in France, Sinti or Roma in Germany, Tziganes in Eastern Europe, or Gitanos in Spain, but over time they are present to some degree in almost every country. Not all practice the same religion, but apart from continuing some Hinduistic practices, the majority practice some form of Christianity. More than anything, what binds them together is a close-knit extended family structure and a common tongue, known as Romany.

At the start of the 20th century, different as they were from the general populace and due to prejudices against them, as well as also owing to their own traditions, the gypsies had been able to maintain their nomadic lifestyle. They tended to travel in small groups of caravans and made their living via various occupations – basket weaving, horse trading, collecting scrap metal, palm readings, etc. Having little regard for the *gadje*, or "peasants," i.e, non-gypsies, for many it was a point of honor to steal food or items from the locals. But in many places both locals and gypsies came to respect and honor one another.

Another form of activity that they were known for are the arts – especially acrobatics, music, and dance. In their travels, gypsies would learn the local favorite songs and add those to an already large repertoire for performances amongst the various places

they would visit for money, food, or for their own enjoyment. Also, being nomadic, they tended to favor instruments that were portable, such as the violin, cymbalom, or the guitar. Not being tied down, most gypsies did not attend school. As a consequence, they tended to be illiterate. This however also freed them to spend their leisure time learning their various trades and to develop playing musical instruments to a high level of proficiency.

Thus it was that many of the working banjo players in the bals musettes tended to be gypsies. Enticed by work and the money they could earn, Gitan banjomen would settle for a time in Paris. A number of these musicians stood out, especially Poulette Castro, Matteo Garcia, and Auguste "Gusti" Malha. These players developed a virtuosic approach on the instrument, which, due to its lack of sustain, and, influenced by the accordionists they performed with, resulted in an arpeggiated technique, along with chordal tremelos.

Foremost among these, Gusti Malha established himself as a first-rate player and composer in this style. He is popularly credited for establishing the subgenre known as *Valses Manouche* which were waltzes, usually in minor keys, and were noted for their tendency to use 7^{th} and diminished chords as well as 6ths, 9ths, and even 13ths. Malha is today perhaps best remembered for his composition "Reine de Musette." Against this background it is now time to introduce the first of our two main protaganists.

4. Mario Maccaferri

Mario Maccaferri was born May 20, 1900 in Cento, Italy to parents who were agricultural laborers. He spent a short time at school and in 1911 became an apprentice to luthier and guitarist Luigi Mozzani, who had founded an instrument making school in Cento. Under Mozzani's tutelage, Maccaferri learned both classical guitar and the construction of guitars, harp guitars, mandolins, violins, and cellos. After a stint in the army 1917-18 he completed his studies at the Sienna Academy of Music in 1922.

Beginning in 1920 though 1923 Maccaferri gave numerous concerts including a European tour. During this time critics compared him favorably to the other great classical guitarist of the time, Andrés Segovia. One major difference from Segovia was that Maccaferri preferred to use a thumbpick instead of his thumbnail, ostensibly for greater sound projection.

In 1923 Maccaferri returned to Cento and opened his own instrument shop with instruments of his construction and design while still continuing his concert career. In 1926 he became the first instructor of guitar at the Sienna Academy but an opportunity at his uncle's instrument workshop in Paris led him to relocate there the following year. Soon, his violin designs began to win prizes across Europe.

While in Paris, Maccaferri heard jazz for the first time and decided to move to London.While there he occupied himself giving guitar lessons and concerts along with touring, but felt that the typical classical guitar was not producing enough sound. At the same time both in Britain and in France, jazz was gaining popularity and bands were getting bigger and playing larger venues. Guitarists began clamoring for instruments that could cut through with more volume and clarity. Maccaferri's decided to find a solution to this problem.

He began working on a prototype of a new guitar design and in 1931 presented his ideas to the brothers Ben and Lew Davis who ran the London branch of Selmer instruments. Impressed by Maccaferri's innovative guitar designs, Ben Davis in turn put Maccaferri in touch with Henri Selmer in Paris. At this time, Henri Selmer's company was in a period of expansion and Selmer was looking to move into the guitar market to compete with American makers such as Gibson, National, and Martin. The meeting went well and in April, 1931, Selmer made space in his Paris factory and Maccaferri began working on his guitars.

5. The Guitar

At his Paris workshop, Maccaferri began by organizing the tools and machinery and started training the workforce. All the moulds, templates and special tools were designed by Maccaferri and made on site. It was then that his revolutionary design began to take form. At Henri Selmer's request, Maccaferri had been asked to make designs for a number of different models – classical, concert harp (with between two and six extra resonating strings), Hawaiian, and, due to the aforesaid popularity of jazz bands, a steel-string "jazz" model, known as the "Orchestre," of which this paper is concerned with, along with a four-string version.

The first guitars began production in 1932 with Maccaferri concentrating first on classical models. To learn more about jazz he began frequenting the Paris clubs and got to know what guitarists there were looking for. Though virtually all the instruments Maccaferri constructed for Selmer entailed design improvements, for him the most important features were incorporated into the Orchestre model, which introduced a number of improvements that were to influence guitar makers worldwide.

One look at this instrument and one immediately recognizes they are looking at an instrument quite different from the guitar of Torres. Inspired by Neapolitan mandolins Maccaferri's guitar incorporated a vast series of innovations which will be shortly noted here:

> The Body: The majority of the backs & sides were made of 3-ply laminated Indian rosewood. Some used laminated Brazilian rosewood or mahogany, and a few used solid birdseye North American Maple. At the time laminated wood was an innovation – Maccaferri noticed that solid wood bodies tended to damage more quickly and laminated woods tended to be stronger and last longer, as well as making the body lighter. Inspired by the F-style mandolin the instrument also incorporated a distinctive cutaway to allow better access to the higher frets
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> The Top: Always made of 2 halves joined at the middle of European spruce, the tops of the Orchestre were curved without being archtops.
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> The Neck: The vast majority of necks were 3-piece European walnut lined with three or four 2x12mm duralumin plates, lightened with holes bored in them. Though non-adjustable, they added to the stability of the neck. The fingerboard was made of ebony and also boasted a zero fret on the basis that it improved

intonation. On D-holed instruments the fretboard continued allowing 24 frets on the 1st string only. Oval holed models stopped short of the soundhole.

Tailpiece**:** Maccaferri again used mandolin design to come up with a unique tailpiece that affixed to the bottom of the body.

Bridge**:** Here Maccaferri used the mandolin principle of having a floating bridge as opposed to a bridge glued to the body. These guitars came with a number (usually seven!) of bridges with different heights to accommodate the needs of any player. Another very characteristic element in the design of this guitar were the "moustaches" on the sides of the bridge. The use of these "moustaches" were not merely ornamental as they served as guides to align the bridges correctly.

Tuning Machines: These represented an entirely new design patented by Maccaferri that enclosed the gears inside a casing fixed to a base plate. This casing protected two cog wheels ensuring permanent self lubrication of the gears, which was not possible with open tuning machines. It also increased the number of teeth and improved the tooth angle so that at least four teeth were in permanent contact at any time leading to greater sturdiness, precision, and less wear.

The Soundbox: Another distinctive characteristic of the Selmer Maccaferri is the the big D, or "grand bouche" soundhole. In part created for a bigger sound, but also to compensate for the guitarist leaning over his instrument thus muffling part of its tone, and inspired by 19th century romantic guitars and harp guitars he had learned to construct in Mozzani's shop, Maccaferri improved on the design to add volume, tone, and clarity to the guitar, receiving a patent in 1930. Basically a box within the body, the resonator had a reflector that enabled the sound to be directed out of the soundhole. The D soundhole's function was thus purely pragmatic as Maccaferri found that with a smaller soundhole he was not able to achieve the desired results.

Overall, around 200 guitars were produced in the first year with almost all being sent to London. In 1933, while Maccaferri went back to concert touring the factory turned out fewer guitars, the majority being 4-string models. Around this time, however, Maccaferri had a falling out with Henri Selmer (the actual details are unclear, but it had evidently to do with the limited duration of his contract) and left the company with the oversight of construction of the guitars falling to Maccaferri's deputy Lucien Guerinet.

The story of the Selmer guitar doesn't end with Maccaferri's departure, however. The design had proven itself and, though it sold reasonably well in its first years, it was its use by the Gypsy guitar sensation Django Reinhardt that cemented its popularity.

6. Django Reinhardt

Born in Liberchies, Belgium on January 23, 1910, the Manouche gypsy Jean "Django" Reinhardt emerged to become one of the premier names in the jazz pantheon. Growing up in the gypsy nomadic tradition, Reinhardt began his musical career playing

with his father and uncles amongst the caravans. In time, the family made it to the banlieues of Paris and the teenaged Reinhardt began to establish himself as a master of the 6-string guitar banjo, accompanying various accordionists in the bals-musettes. He soon began composing waltzes on his own and due to the presence of various traveling American jazz bands arriving in Paris, Django became acquiainted with the new jazz music from across the sea. From then on he began to assimilate jazz phrasing and ideas into his playing. He made his first recording at the tender age of 18 ("Ma Reguliere" with accordionist Jean Vaissade and slide whistle player!) and soon received an invitation from British jazz bandleader and impresario Jack Hylton to join him on a British tour.

Alas, this was not to be. Within days, Django fell victim to a fire in his caravan which severely burnt his left hand, leaving his last two fingers paralyzed. At the start of his 18-month convalesence, his brother Joseph brought him a guitar to keep him company and inspire his recovery and it was during this time that Django taught himself to play guitar.

In July, 1931 with Django finally fully recovered. he and his wife took off towards the south of France and ended up in Toulon. There, a propitious meeting with jazz afficionado Emile Savitry led to Django hearing the latest records by Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Joe Venuti with Eddie Lang, inspiring the guitarist towards a new musical concept. Further inspiration came in the autumn of that year when he met the violinist Stephane Grapelli after hearing him playing jazz in a Parisian club.

7. The Quintette de Hot Club de France

In 1932 in Paris a group of jazz fans got together to propagate and disseminate jazz in Europe, leading to founding of the Hot Club de France. At first, the club just met to listen to jazz records and have discussions. However, by 1934, the organization was looking to put on concerts and have a representative band to be the face of the association. Auspiciously, it was at this time Django and Grapelli had found themselves in the same band with bassist Louis Vola who had, along with fellow guitarist Roger Chaput, begun to hold jam sessions in the backroom of the dance hall where they were playing. Word about this great new music being played reached member of the Hot Club, and when they heard Django and Grapelli's new group along with Django's brother Joseph on second rhythm guitar they decided this was the band to represent the organization.

To begin promoting the group, dubbed The Quintette of the Hot Club of France, the organization felt it was important to make a recording. Unfortunately, the first recording session for the Odeon label was a failure. The band was considered to modernistic due to its completely original all-string instrumentation – three guitars, a violin, and acoustic bass – and its unique approach to jazz. Their style of playing was also different than their North American counterparts, as the guitars provided what is termed, "*la pompe,*" i.e., the boom-chick, bass note-chord rhythm indicative of Gypsy Jazz. This feel could then be accented by syncopated half-note and triplets fills, flamenco rasquendo, as well as balaika-like tremolo chords.

The band's first successful release was the recording of "Dinah" at the end of the year on the Ultraphone label and was an immediate sensation. However, their first gigs didn't commence until 1935. The band – with various changes in players around Django

and Grapelli – stayed together until the breakout of World War II in 1939. In all, the group recorded some 140 songs.

Django also found himself being featured on other recordings, including American stars who were touring Europe and furthermore established himself not only as an exceptional musician, but also as a first-rate composer in the genre with pieces such as "Djangology" and "Minor Swing." The incomparable "Nuages," composed and released in 1940, thrust Django Reinhardt to worldwide fame and made him a veritable star in France.

Note must be made of Django Reinhardt's many contributions to guitar playing. He introduced and/or popularized numerous techniques, such as playing in octaves, string bends, tremelo chords, natural and artificial harmonics, melodic and harmonic dissonances, long and fast chromatic runs, two and three-octave arpeggios, unconventional chords, and was one of the first European jazzmen to make use of the flatted 5$^{th.}$ Also not to be overlooked is that later in his life established his bona fides as a painter and actually exhibited during his lifetime.

Django's connection to the Selmer Maccaferri began in the early 1930s when he acquired a Maccaferri gut string model, but soon switched to the Orchestre steel-string for its greater volume and projection. Starting in 1935 Django Reinhardt began using Selmer guitars almost exclusively, switching to their guitars with the smaller soundhole and longer neck extention a year or two later. By the late 1930s Django Reinhardt and Henri Selmer formed a promotional arrangement where Selmer provided Django with guitars in exchange for his endorsement. No contract was ever signed. He continued to use Selmers until his untimely death in 1953 at age forty-three.

8. Selmer After Maccaferri

After Mario Maccaferri left Selmer 1934-35 became transition years for the instrument. In 1934 the main modification was the removal of the soundbox as the design required both more time and expense and in any case did not receive much postive response among guitarists. As the soundbox was the only reason for the large D soundhole, on its removal the design was soon modified to the characteristic oval "petit bouche" soundhole associated with Selmer guitars thereafter, while the necks began to be attached the body at the 14th fret. During the transitional period only Orchestre models continued to be produced. In 1936 the new construction style was finalized and did not undergo any major modifications until the stoppage of production in 1952. Though it is open to conjecture, it is thought these changes were instituted by Lucien Guerinet, who ran the guitar department once Maccaferri left.

Near the end of 1952 Henri Selmer decided to end making guitars and focus on the far more lucrative saxophone market. The entire stock was then sold to Jean Beuscher, a Paris-based luthier. The total number of Selmer guitars produced totals less than 900.

9. Selmer Copies

On account of Django's use of this instrument, many guitarists soon began adopting Selmers as their instruments of choice and this is still the style of instrument

preferred by today's gypsy guitarists. Since Selmer guitars were both popular and expensive, many luthiers soon began making less expensive versions. The two most important were Busato and Di Mauro. After the war the demand for Selmer copies grew exponentially and hundreds were produced by such makers as Jacobacci, Favino, Anastasio, the Gerome Brothers, Olivieri, Rossi, Bucolo, Patenotte, and Burgassi.

10. Gypsy Guitars 1970-Present

With the rise in popularity of the electric guitar in th 1960s interest in the Selmer Maccaferri style acoustic guitar waned considerably, with far fewer being made or sold. Trying to work against the grain, British guitarist Maurice Summerfield attempted to revive interest in the instrument by working out an agreement with the Japanese company Ibanez. Mario Maccaferri heard about this and put his stamp of approval on the venture and in 1975 the company began manufacturing a D-hole 12 fret model. Maccaferri however broke off the collaboration in 1981, disappointed in the substandard quality of the instruments. In all, 440 were made.

It was not until the 1990's began was there a renewed interest in acoustic music and instruments which resulted in a rediscovery of Django Reinhardt and Gyspy Jazz. Today Luthiers from all over are making their versions of the Selmer jazz guitar with some of the most important ones being located in the UK, USA, and Germany. However, French makers have also remained active with the most well-known producers being Favino, Fontaine, Moneret (who took over for Gerome Brothers), and Dupont.

11. Django's Legacy

Throughout Django's career and to this day, he remains one of the most revered figures amongst gyspies around the globe and especially in Europe. Along the way, there formed an almost cult-like veneration for his music, his style of playing, and even his guitars, and his music and techniques continued to be handed down in the traditional oral way amongst gypsy musicians. However, even against this background, the decades of 1960-70 saw most gypsy guitarists moving away from Selmer style guitars for modern jazz and electric instruments.

Nevertheless, behind the scenes, such individuals as Francis Moerman, Phillipe, Nedjar, and Raphael Fays were doing their utmost to keep interest in the music and the instrument alive, with one of the most important developments being the establishment of the Festival Django Reinhardt at Samois-sur-Seine in 1968.

As the 1990's came around, a Gypsy Swing Revival slowly began. Today, the number of practitioners of this music number in the hundreds, if not the thousands. Some of the most well-known names today are: Bireli Lagrene, Mandino Reinhardt, Dorado Schmidt, Han'sche Weiss, Lulu Reinhardt, Fapy Lafertin, Koen De Cauter, Stochelo Rosenberg, Rino Van Hoidonk, Mike Selander, May Biteel, Bob O'Brien, Mike Peters, and Dick Van Male, Babik Reinhardt, Christian Escoude, Tchavolo Schmitt, Moreno Winterstein, Angelo Debarre, Christophe Larrtilleux, Romane Leguidcoq, Serge Krieff, Rodolphe Raffalli, Laurent Bajata, Patrick Soussois, Didier Roussin, and Stephane Wrembel.

12. Maccaferri's Legacy

After leaving Selmer, Maccaferri went back to his concert career. However in 1933 an accident in a swimming pool fractured his right wrist. With his concert career in jeopardy Maccaferri, ever the innovator, developed an interest in woodwind reeds. This led to the development of a new way of cutting them resulting in a new patent and soon he had established a successful company selling his reeds worldwide. However, the war caught up with him as 1939 saw the fall of France. Maccaferri was exceptionally fortunate to catch the last boat out of Le Havre for the United States. With $1 left in his pocket he arrived in the US to join his wife and daughter, who were already in New York.

After arriving in the US his company was given a big boost with Benny Goodman endorsing his products along with winning a contract to supply the US Army bands. Due to the lack of cane exports during the war, Maccaferri then went on to develop and patent the first plastic reeds. He also patented and produced the world's first plastic clothes pegs. On the back of these successes, Maccaferri founded Mastro Plastics Corporation and began manufacturing plastics, including plastic ukuleles and guitars. His remarkable career continued apace with numerous other inventions, including the first audio cassette and as late as 1989 he invented a working plastic violin. Maccaferri died April 16, 1993. He was Ninety-three years old. Yet Maccaferri is still perhaps best known for his innovative guitar.